

May 1970

Health - The Supernatural View

Vincent P. McCorry

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

McCorry, Vincent P. (1970) "Health - The Supernatural View," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 37 : No. 2 , Article 21.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol37/iss2/21>

HEALTH—*The Supernatural View*

Vincent P. McCorry, S.J.

Perhaps the first necessity in a discussion such as we now undertake is to examine and maybe to defend that respectable but equivocal term "supernatural". The word does not mean "preternatural", "unnatural", "anti-natural" or even "psychic". What does it mean?

The Christian tradition affirms that the life of man is in fact a double life, that it is lived on two levels or in two dimensions. In the third chapter of St. John's Gospel there is recorded a most significant conversation between Christ and an educated, professional man named Nicodemus. The point of the Saviour's remarks is the necessity for man of rebirth, but rebirth to a life different from physical life. Man's first birth is from *his mother's womb*, the second is *from above*, it comes about *through water and the Spirit*. Our Lord underlines the distinction between the two births and consequently between the two lives: *What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit*. In various ways throughout the Gospels, but especially in John, Christ steadily distinguishes between the two levels of existence.

With His first recorded words Jesus sharply contrasts *my Father* with our Lady's *your father* (referring to St. Joseph). Speaking to the Samaritan woman (John 4) Christ distinguishes between two kinds of water; shortly after, with His disciples, He distinguishes between two kinds of food; in John 6 He distinguishes between two kinds of life, in the same place and elsewhere He distinguishes between temporal life and eternal life.

Taken up and repeatedly urged by St. Paul, as in the fifth chapter of Galatians; this theme of two distinct lives became standard Christian teaching. Natural life is that which we

Vincent McCorry, S.J.: Long an associate editor and still weekly author of the well known column "The Word", for America. He is now involved as well with the Loyola House of Retreats at Morristown, N.J. He is the author of two books and is appreciated for his work both in pastoral and scriptural theology.

know by sense-experience and by reason. Supernatural life we know and live by faith. This second life is as truly a vitality and a dynamism as the first.

Is it also Christian teaching that between natural and supernatural there is not only distinction, but opposition? Clearly, yes; yet the answer demands still another distinction. Since it is perfectly natural for man straightway to satisfy his appetites, and since those appetites will often be clamorous in their demands, it follows that supernatural considerations will at times stand as a painfully thwarting factor in Christian life. The present outcry against clerical celibacy is perfectly illustrative of the bitter antagonism that arises, upon occasion, between natural and supernatural. On the other hand, tension between natural and supernatural must not be urged into such hopeless contrariety that one will be regarded as excluding the other, or that the natural will be identified with evil, the supernatural with good. *Naturalia non sunt turpia*, runs the old Scholastic tag; "No one need be ashamed of the natural." Our Saviour, in His life among us, respected, accepted and praised natural values. Note, for example, His approval of marriage. His concern that hungry people get something to eat, His love of children. Christ's position on natural and supernatural is simple and clear: the natural is good; the supernatural gets the priority.

It follows then that when we approach the question of human health from a strictly religious view rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we will not for an instant suggest that man's

health is a negligible factor in his life, that man's physical well-being is of no consequence so long as he is spiritually hale and hearty. As is abundantly clear, physical health and spiritual health are so intimately interwoven that one always — somehow — acts upon and influences the other. From any point of view, however, it must be acknowledged that physical health is not an absolute. It is a highly conditioned aspect of the human being.

What was the Old Testament attitude toward health? Since, in the Old Testament, notions of an afterlife were extremely foggy, attention centered on well-being in the present life. Health, wealth, family contentment, abundance, security — all the values that were summed up in the word *shalom, peace* — represented the apex of desirability. The firm theology was that all these blessings are direct gifts of Yahweh, and that they are assuredly bestowed upon the good man, the man who faithfully observed the Law. Old Testament writers struggled helplessly with the evident fact that good men suffered, and the wicked often prospered. Nevertheless, natural well-being continues to draw admiration and recommendation, and the wisdom books in particular sing the praises of satisfaction in the here and now.

In the 38th chapter of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) we encounter a most interesting discussion of health and the doctor. The passage, with brief comments, as follows:

Honor the doctor with the honor (payment, probably) that is his due in

return for his services; for he too has been created by the Lord. Healing itself comes from the Most High, like a gift from a king. The doctor's learning keeps his head high, he is regarded with awe by potentates. The Lord has brought medicines into existence from the earth, and the sensible man will not despise them. Did not a piece of wood once sweeten the water, thus giving proof of its virtue? (A reference to a Mosaic miracle recorded in Exodus 15: 23-25.) He has also given men (doctors) learning, so that they may glory in his mighty works. He uses them (medicines) to heal and to relieve pain, the chemist makes up a mixture from them. Thus there is no end to his (God's) activities, and through him health extends across the world. My son, when you are ill, do not be depressed, but pray to the Lord and he will heal you. Renounce your faults, keep your hands unsoiled, and cleanse your heart from all sin. Offer incense and a memorial of fine flour, and make as rich an offering as you can afford. Then let the doctor take over — the Lord created him too — and do not let him leave you, for you need him. Sometimes success is in their hands, since they in turn will beseech the Lord to grant them the grace to relieve and to heal, that Life may be saved.

The balanced position of this ancient wisdom-writer is remarkable. There is the pronounced supernatural view — health comes from God, it is connected with virtue, health is an object of prayer — but there is also the clear counsel to take your medicine and do what the doctor tells you. The learned writer regards the doctor as a fellow sage, and notice his assumption that the doctor too will beseech the Lord, begging the grace to relieve and to heal.

Against this background of concern for health it is surprising that the Old Testament gives us so few stories of healing. Moses, setting up the symbolic brazen serpent, delivers the people from a plague of venomous snakes; much afflicted Job is restored to health; Tobias, Sr., is cured of blindness with an amazing prescription; Elijah and Elisha recall the dead to life, and Elisha cures Naaman of leprosy; King Hesekiah, dying, is granted, through prayer, a new lease on life. Healing is not really a prominent element in the Old Testament tradition.

When we enter the world of the New Testament, and especially the world of the four Gospels, a striking change appears. The Saviour is described (particularly by the Synoptics) as performing an abundance of miracles, most of which are works of healing. Jesus cures fever, palsy, paralysis, leprosy; He restores speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, sight to the blind; He heals people suffering from what we would now regard as advanced psychosis; in three recorded instances He brings the dead back to life. Our Lord's wonders of healing were so plentiful that at times the Evangelists report them compendiously, as in Luke 4: 40: *And when the sun was going down, all those who had friends afflicted with many kinds of disease brought them to him: and he laid his hands upon each one of them, and healed them.* The difficulty is that this evangelical emphasis can lead to a misunderstanding of our Saviour's essential mission and even meaning. For an accurate comprehension of Christ's wonderworking, let us quote from the authoritative *Dictionary of the Bible* by Fr. John McKenzie, S.J.:

"The most common designation of miracle (in the New Testament) is *dynamis, power*... This concept may be summed up in general in these terms: the Incarnation is the entrance of the power of God into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was constituted the Son of God in power (Rom. 1:4); indeed he is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24). His conception occurs when the power of God overshadows Mary (Lk. 1:35). This is not simply a power of working wonders; as the power of God, mysterious, supreme, and subject to no restraint, it breaks out in all directions... This outbreak of power first resides in Jesus himself... It is a power to save not only from the evil of sin but also from ills of the body, a power to heal (Lk. 5:17). The power which resides in Jesus is communicated by him to his apostles (Lk. 9:1); and after the ascension the power of the kingdom of God (Mk. 9:1) resides in the Church in which he continues to live. The fullness of the power is communicated to the apostles by the reception of the Spirit at Pentecost... The apostles feel themselves full of the power of Jesus, which enables them to preach, to bear witness to him, to heal. The power exhibits itself also in the charismata which appeared in the primitive Church (1 Cor. 12:10)."

Fr. McKenzie adds: "In the healing miracles Jesus appears as Saviour; the power and will of God to save is not restricted to the preaching of the word and the forgiveness of sins, although these are great and fundamental, but it also operates to remove the consequences of sin, human infirmity and suffering."

Thus enlightened by an eminent Scripture scholar, we may in two ways qualify our impression of Christ's

curative wonders. First, our Lord did not heal physical ills simply for the sake of physical well-being. We must always be remembered that all the people whom Jesus cured subsequently died. Our Saviour's miracles were the manifestation of the power of God as it prevailed over the power and kingdom of evil; and in the biblical view, sickness and death are among the consequences of sin and evil. Second, Christ certainly did not cure *all* the sick people with whom He came in contact. We assume from the Gospel silence that St. Joseph, our Lord's foster-father, died during the Saviour's lifetime; Christ did nothing to prevent that death. In Acts 3 we read how Peter and John healed a man *lame from birth* who sat daily, begging, at one of the Temple gates. We cannot of course be certain, but it is possible that Christ had more than once seen that man. Matthew tells us (13:58) that when our Saviour visited his own town of Nazareth he *did not work many miracles there because of their lack of faith*.

As we have seen, our Lord explicitly (Lk. 9:1) bestowed upon the apostles the power to heal. In Acts 5 we read that the people *used to bring sick folk into the streets, and lay them down there on beds and pallets, in the hope that even the shadow of Peter might fall upon one of them here and there, as he passed by, and so they would be healed of their infirmities*. Further, St. Paul includes healing in his list of Christian, pentecostal charisms.

The New Testament word *charisma* (pl. *charismata*), which has now come into surprisingly common use, means, according to Fr. McKenzie, "a particular type of spiritual gift which enables its receiver to perform some office or function in the Church." In the 12th chapter of the First

Corinthian letter St. Paul twice provides a list of charisms. The two catalogues differ, but each contains nine items, and both include *powers or gifts of healing*. No details are given, and no instances cited. However, we do read in Acts of Paul's own exercise of the power of healing: in chapter 14 he heals a man *crippled from birth*; in chapter 28 he cures a case of *fever and dysentery* and then heals *other folk in the island* (Malta) *who were suffering from infirmities*; and in chapter 20 he restores to life a young man who had fallen out a third story window. It is a huge comfort to subsequent Christian preachers that the youth, sitting near the window, had fallen asleep during a Pauline sermon.

Such, in very brief survey, is the biblical story of healing from physical infirmity. What conclusions may we draw with regard to the contemporary problems of the right to health and the proper function of the Catholic physician?

From the religious point of view — as well as from the most pragmatic point of view — the right to health is a limited one. Religiously speaking, the right to health is limited by the mysterious decree of divine Providence. As is evident, there are numerous instances in which God simply does not bestow the blessing of health or does not restore it when it has been damaged. Anyone who wishes may pursue this theme, but he will find the effort no more rewarding than all the philosophers and theologians who have wrestled with the problem of evil from time immemorial. This world, according to one of the Church's liturgical prayers, is a "valley of tears", and although the declaration does not

express the entire truth, it most certainly articulates a basic fact of life. In the amplitude and clarity of eternal bliss we shall not doubt achieve an understanding of God's plan for men, especially as it does not exclude what is most painful, the suffering of the innocent. For now, however, the mystery stands impenetrable. As someone has said, there is very little use in trying to explain a religious mystery in such a way that it will no longer be a mystery.

The right to health is further and most definitely limited by the fact of universal death. Medicine, that noble and most humane science, may and should battle death to a fare-thee-well. Exactly. Sooner or later comes the hour of fare-thee-well.

What the right to health evidently means is that all men, so far as is humanly possible, should have access to the ordinary means to health. Negatively, the principle means that no one should be barred, by reason of race or religion or even poverty, from the normal remedies, care and procedures that maintain or restore health. Positively, the title to physical well-being extends only to the ordinary or generally accepted means to health. It can scarcely be maintained that every cardiac ought to have a heart-transplant. Thus understood, the right of every man to health is real and God-given, and every responsible element in human society must conspire with every other for the actual implementation of that right.

The physician who is also a convinced Christian will consider that he is the inheritor of the Pauline charism of healing. He will regard this authentic gift of God in a double light.

First, he will understand that his quasi-sacramental capacity to heal the sick is not without its limitations. A doctor is a man, and only one man. He cannot reach everyone in his ministrations, and sometimes, inevitably, his ministrations will fail. Not only will he not always defeat death, but he himself will someday surrender to that grim sergeant. Second, the Catholic physician will appreciate that his healing charism involves a particular dedication that is rooted in his whole Christian philosophy of life.

Briefly, for the medical man of faith the patient is not simply a problem — which, one way or another, he often is — but a person. The insistence of contemporary philosophy on the value, the uniqueness, the sacredness of the individual person stands in agreement with traditional Christian teaching. It can be an enlightening experience to ride (for example) the crowded New York subway and pass the time looking about you with some thoughtfulness. Here are many people, some old, some young, they are black and white and brown, they speak in various tongues, some are shabby and even dirty, most seem tired, all are heading toward eternity as they ride the real but symbolic subway. God created each one of these; He loves each one with an infinite love; for each, as if alone, Christ laid down His life; each has an eternal destiny. To fastidious human eyes these people, collectively and individually, may not seem like much; in God's view, each

one of them is precious beyond all description, and for each one God intends, finally, only what is best.

As often as it has been soundly, the warning may and must be repeated: of all men, the doctor and the priest must battle the demon of disillusionment. As the years pass and the rosy optimism of youth fades, it becomes perilously easy for the priest and doctor, whose joint business is the essential well-being of men, to lose faith in men. The process may be subtle, and only half acknowledged. We all remember the declaration of one of the characters in the celebrated *Charley Brown* comic strip: "I love mankind. I just can't stand people." If, in addition to cynicism about the human animal, the Catholic doctor or the Catholic priest begins to suffer disillusionment with regard to his Church, he will stand, professionally, in a kind of double jeopardy.

In one word, that one word which will survive all abuse and misuse, the doctor, like the priest, must love. The task is not easy; often it will be carried out in spite of the most understandable human reluctances. For the Christian doctor, one most concrete exercise of that love will be a sustained effort to see to it that as far as in him lies, every man's right to health, properly understood, be implemented, and to capacity. Therein the grace of God will not be wanting; and anyone who believes in Christian charism believes in grace.